

Bridging the climate change generation gap

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Byline: Jennifer Cole Contributor Jennifer Cole is a Vancouver-based freelance writer.

Body

In March, the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPPC) issued a warning. Unless immediate action was taken, climate change could careen out of control. There's a fine line between inspiring change and creating paralyzing fear and hopelessness.

Lakehead University surveyed teens and young adults between the ages of 16 and 25. Over half of the respondents said that climate change was making them feel anxious, afraid and they felt powerless to do anything about it.

Traditionally, the best place for any young person, to find hope is from the example set by the adults, parents, grandparents, teachers, aunts and uncles in their lives. Researchers at Stanford University say that when older adults contribute to the well-being of youth it cultivates a sense of purpose that extends both ways. But are we, the so-called example-setters, also feeling anxious about climate change?

In 2021, the Pew Research Center asked respondents in 17 countries if they were willing to change the way they lived to tackle climate change. Over half said they were but added that they weren't convinced it would make a difference. After British Columbia's infamous 2021 heat dome researchers noticed a 13 per cent increase in anxiety related to the climate emergency among British Columbians.

Climate change anxiety is intergenerational. In the United Kingdom, a study by King's College and the New Scientist magazine found little to no difference between age cohorts on how they felt about climate change.

Indeed, the research found that baby boomers, aged 59 and older are more likely to act environmentally consciously than their younger gen-Z counterparts. The authors of the study concluded that parents and grandparents care about the state of the planet and the legacy they're leaving.

Across Canada, older Canadians are taking action and using their experience to leave a better world for their grandchildren. In Ontario, for example, Seniors for Climate Action Now say they've heard young people and will use their voices to amplify concerns and lobby the government to act.

The youth Lakehead surveyed pointed fingers at lawmakers for not doing enough. In fairness, the federal government has created the Environment and Climate Youth Council, whose mandate is to advise politicians on climate issues. But it doesn't solve the problem.

Bridging the climate change generation gap

My gen-Z nieces see the world as a much different place 30 years from now. They envision depleted resources and sea level rise from melting polar ice wiping out entire communities. It's hard for me to tell them it will be OK when scientists say that even if we immediately stopped fossil fuels it would take centuries for climate change to abate.

One of the findings of the Lakehead survey was the cone of silence around climate anxiety. Youth are not sure who will listen to them. I'm scared and anxious too. Maybe by talking about my fear it helps pave a path for them to express theirs and then together we can find the answers.

Jennifer Cole is a Vancouver-based freelance writer.

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